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# **What's the social network got to do with it?!?: An adult and higher education evaluation of perceptions and motivations to study abroad**

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Keywords: study abroad, international adult learning, symbolic convergence, informal learning, popular culture, social network

**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to investigate adult learners' perceptions and motivations to study abroad as well as the kinds of influences, including popular culture and social networks, that influence adult students to study abroad.

## **Introduction**

Education abroad is a concept that has received a dynamic and wide range of attention in recent years. As academia is more aware of our globalized and interconnected society, there follows a push to understand less traditional and more impactful cross-cultural education. Although study abroad has been around since the mid- and late-1920's, much of the intricacies of learning abroad for adults is relatively limited. In today's increasingly global and diverse market there still is much that adult educators do not know about how and why adult learners are specifically motivated to engage in intercultural/international learning and study abroad. Clarke, , Flaherty, Wright, & McMillen, (2009) note that study abroad programs have more than doubled in the past decade and yet little is known about what exactly serves to motivate students to study in any specific region of the world when the goal is not language driven. A problem exists in that there is limited research available about perceptions and motivations to study abroad as well as the kinds of popular culture influences that serve to impact the study abroad process. In our increasingly global market and society, there is a vast influx in study abroad providers and programs but very little done in determining the motivations of participation and their implications for the adult learner in higher education (Cann, 2000).

## **Review of Relevant Literature**

Much of the research examining short term study abroad focuses on implicit notions that perspective transformation occurs simply by living and interacting in a foreign locale, but studies fail to consider the individual's initial frame of reference. Yet, "traveling, with the purpose of learning, has been an emphatic trend in the adult education field" (Reghenzani, 1991, p. 3). Similarly, research looking at the role of experiential learning for adults who travel abroad support the notion that study abroad may result in transformations of students' self view, including relationships with peers, their own personal beliefs and values, their perceptions of their own country and culture, and the ability to express these values and beliefs (Stavig, 1966).

Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002) discuss this notion in that while all study abroad programs hold the potential for experiential education, there is a continuum within study abroad from programs that simply transfer academic credits from one traditional, discipline based institution to another without intentionally utilizing the international experience as the basis for learning (p. 43). In essence, international experiential education is subjective to both the individual and the program of study providing further support for the need to better understand the pre-departure dynamics of study abroad for adults.

There is limited research that exists on perceptions and motivations, as well as influences to these types of study abroad programs. The findings and discussion surrounding the topic delve into:

(1) Expectations which are developed by a reflexive process involve personal background and are subject to influence. (2) Most purposes are based in the person's desire to learn. (3) Some travelers who do not expect to learn are externally motivated. (4) Others who do not expect to learn have a passive outlook. (5) The focus of purposes is subject to influence. (6) Learning is associated with indicators of the ability to reflect purposefully upon reality (Parks, 1987, p.1).

Ultimately, these findings and conclusions suggest that there are indeed relationships between purpose, reflexivity and learning outcomes; however, they fail to consider the role of perceptions and motivations that shape the purpose. The notion of 'influence' then becomes another source of ambiguity and forces proponents of study abroad to ask what are these influences that impact the expectations (perceptions) and the focus of purpose (reason) that students travel abroad.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In literature regarding motivation to study abroad, researchers identify motivations including financial factors, academic major and cultural accessibility as primary factors (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009). In general, research on motives in adult learning focuses on formal learning settings and participation (Long, 2004), and has been characterized as activity-oriented, goal-oriented, and/or learning-oriented (Houle, 1979). In addition, scholars suggest that adults have either global motives or specific motives to learn (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Long, 1993).

In an attempt to synergize the broadest frame of understanding with respect to how perceptions and motivations to study abroad are formed, the researchers employed symbolic convergence theory (SCT). This communication-based theory developed by Bormann (1985) is also known as fantasy-theme analysis and is used to explore how narrative communication can be used to create a social community (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005).

According to Griffin (1991), "Through symbolic convergence, individuals build a sense of community or a group consciousness" (p. 34). This theory suggests that frequent exposure to the myths and themes of popular culture may influence an individual's perceptions of the culture or country being visited. This given theoretical frame can be used to illuminate a link between fantasy themes represented in popular culture and the later decision to engage in study abroad (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 158). Bormann further suggests, "if several or many people develop portions of their private symbolic worlds that overlap as a result of symbolic convergence, they share a common consciousness and have the basis for communicating with one another to create community, to discuss their common experiences, and to achieve mutual understanding" (Foss, 2004, p. 110). For example, adult learners may have accessed new fantasies of education abroad through media, popular culture, and peer networks and use this new information as a basis for forming their own intrinsic motivations and perceptions and then use these outlets as a way to understand the process and engage in their own self-directed effort to participate. Essentially then, symbolic convergence can be recognized through reoccurring mentioning of a term, a phrase, a theme or a narrative within or among connected groups.

In order to digest and understand a vision in its entirety, participants must pay close attention to these themes that can be perceived in group conversations and discussions, and in this case popular media and culture. While individuals group to share experiences and reach certain understandings, they are creating fantasy themes that have possibility to shape into a rhetorical vision. Conversely, however, rhetorical vision causes people to converge to share a mutual reading of perceived reality by giving those individuals a sense of identification for the fantasy themes they share. Consequently, the collective rhetorical visions and the use of fantasy themes can be viewed as corroboration that convergence has occurred (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005).

Additionally, symbolic convergence utilizes a wide scope for examining adult learners' motivations and perceptions to study abroad providing consideration of how the media, social context, and peer networks impact how the individual perceives access to study abroad as well as general information about a particular destination's culture.

### **Research Design**

The investigation was exploratory in nature and was designed to examine the intricacies of how adult learners conceptualized the idea of study abroad, what particular messages served to illustrate what study abroad is, and the role that the social context (peer network, family, media) played in forming these perceptions.

Adult learners who expressed interest in participation were contacted via telephone. Interviews took place in the three months preceding the short-term study abroad course. Ages ranged from 20-47, with six males and 11 females (n=17) for an average age of 25. Adult learners were undergraduate students and graduate students enrolled in a short-term study abroad Italian urbanism course. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, which asked nine questions specifically related to participants' upcoming international experience. Questions guiding this inquiry were: (1) How do adult learners perceive study abroad? (2) What motivates adult learners to study abroad? And, (3) In what ways are adult learners impacted by media messages in popular culture with respect to motivations and perceptions of study abroad?

In the analysis of each transcript, the researchers employed cross-case analysis using the constant comparison method "to group answers...to the common questions [and] analyze different perspectives on central issues" (Patton, 1990, p. 376). This method allowed the researchers to systematically take an individual interview and compare it to other interviews to assess the convergence and divergence among the data (Glasser, 1965). Transcripts were coded and analyzed for emergent themes. A coding schema was created in order to facilitate the constant comparative technique. Researchers then employed SCT to discover the meaning within the schema. The process involved the three steps outlined in Bormann's (1985) formulation. First, we analyzed the data by discovering what and how meaning is communicatively shared in the group. Then, we identified the "effects such group consciousnesses have in terms of meanings, motives, and communication within the group" which characterized the shared group fantasy (p. 129). Finally, we looked for why and when the group shared the fantasy, and its meaning in terms of perceptions of and motivations to study abroad.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

Findings offer insight into how individuals in one's social network may serve as an informal learning source and ultimately as motivator. Participants report that information about study abroad is sought through public pedagogical sources like social networks and popular medias, and that these sources additionally may serve to motivate the individual to embark on the particular international experience. Further, this research also holds possibility to aid future

facilitators of study abroad education to understand how informal learning and fantasy relationships between the individual and characters in popular media can influence one's decision to participate in education abroad.

Participants expressed initial concerns that study abroad was something that was not accessible to people who were not wealthy. Study abroad seemed unattainable for them as individuals because they were not "rich" or "glamorous." Although they wished to partake in international travel, they did not believe themselves to be of the ilk of those who study abroad. Of the 17 participants, 14 noted that learning about and obtaining funding to study abroad was paramount to their ability in committing to the international experience. Participant #2 shared, "I heard that scholarships were available this Summer and not a lot of people had applied...so this might actually be my chance to go!" Similarly, other participants shared that financial security was a must in order to even consider a study abroad program. Other adult learners noted that popularized images of "backpacking, sightseeing, and travelling" were activities that they never perceived as a reality for them, but that scholarship money influenced them to reexamine their self-perceptions of their participation, as well as those of study abroad.

Another important and relatively unexplored aspect related to motivation to study abroad exists in the idea that students were encouraged by elements within their social networks. Cobb (1976) posits that individuals rely on peers and social networks in order to make sense of the decisions and occurrences in their daily lives. Social support served dual purposes in terms of motives to study abroad and perception formation. First, participants who suggested that they never considered themselves as study abroad students looked to their social networks as a source of information and support for their interests. Individuals who had friends or professors, who had previously participated in travel or study abroad, were identified as sources that "de-mystified" the possibility and the process. One participant noted that her friend encouraged her "to check it out, so I went up there after she convinced me to do this ...she was like 'we can learn about Italy, and it would be amazing if we could go and, we will get up some money to go (to Italy) and learn' ...and then she told me that they offered a whole bunch of scholarships for it through the college, but it was pretty much the first study abroad that I actually thought I had a chance of getting into." This particular finding suggests that social support plays a large role in students' ability to overcome access issues and perceptions that study abroad is "too expensive" and as such, not for them.

Six participants noted that having someone in their social network that not only offered knowledge about study abroad, but also encouraged them to consider themselves as viable participants, aided in changing the way that they had previously viewed study abroad and helped in their commitment to participate. In addition to serving as a source of information about the study abroad process, family members who travelled abroad before, instructors who encouraged students to study abroad, and friends who had travelled abroad before served as paramount figures who served to motivate the individual in wanting to study abroad. One participant shared "I had a lot of friends who did a study abroad experience in college, and they loved it!" Another shared, "my friends went to London, and they loved it. And I've always wanted to go to Italy. So, it has definitely helped because they have done it already. So, if I have questions they kinda help me." Another participant notes "the professors explained a lot to me when I signed on and I talked to them... You know, what's it going to be like... he was my big influence". Participants noted that having someone encourage them to participate, as well as to reaffirm that study abroad was a positive experience, aided in their desire and motivation to study abroad.

Participants were asked to assess not only their own general perceptions of study abroad, but also of the perceptions that they had about the destination to which they would be traveling. Of the responses related to perception of study abroad, students reported the idea that study abroad would be “fun with friends.” When participants were asked to give their general impressions of study abroad Participant #10 shared, “I have friends who have studied abroad and they have put all of their pictures up on Myspace and Facebook, and you get to look at them and [it] just looks like a good time ya know? Just doing different things - yeah when I think of study abroad I definitely think of having a good time somewhere else.” Another student added that studying abroad is “...well I guess touristy.” Here students indicate that the resources utilized when forming perceptions of study abroad portray the experience as “lets go to Europe and have a party!” Programming like MTV’s Road Rules, The Travel Channel, The Discovery Channel and The History Channel were sources that served to illustrate what studying abroad or international travel may look like. Twelve participants reported some perceptions informed by at least one aspect of popular culture (television, movie, travel books, or internet, or other mass media outlet). This finding indicates that adult learners are accessing a wide range of informal knowledge in popular culture to form perceptions, further suggesting that students use popular culture as a resource for learning.

Participants who shared that they had limited knowledge on Italian culture and people credited *The Travel Channel* as a source for learning. They also cited *The History Channel*, *The Food Network* and other informational programming as influencing their understandings about Italian life. Participant #1 shared that her influence was “specifically, *The Travel Channel* and *The Cooking Channel* definitely. *The Cooking Channel* on Italian food and all of that looks so good, oh and *The History Channel* as well has been kind of influential in teaching me things I did not know.” Another participant discusses “looking at *The Travel Channel*, and when they show the gorgeous country side and how its very family oriented and very much about social gathering and about a sense of community...all of that kind of gives me some ideas about what it’s like [Italian culture]” (Participant #4). Participants discussed that these TV shows gave them insight into some of the intricacies of Italian culture that they did not know before. Another student talks about “Michelangelo, all the Da Vinci stuff is there, I mean every famous artist...that is their roots and that stuff is timeless, and to actually get to see it. Like it is cool to see it on like *The Travel Channel* or *The Discovery Channel*, but to *actually* see it, that is just another thing.” Students explained that outlets in popular culture piqued their interest in coming on the trip and getting to see things that had only been seen on TV or in movies was a “once in a lifetime opportunity.”

### **Implications**

The findings suggest that social networks and popular culture media play an essential role in both perception and motivation for adult learners to participate in these programs. Literature surrounding social support in higher education suggests, “Social support strategies that sustain the preparation and success of all students are critical to improving academic achievement, raising expectations, and increasing college-going rates of underserved students” (Pathwaystocollege.net, Retrieved June 15, 2010). Underscoring the importance of social, peer, media, and financial networks may support study abroad participation for adult learners who do not perceive it as accessible. Unfortunately, many nontraditional and working adults may be unaware/uninformed of the financial support and short-term program possibilities. Changing the emphasis on the kinds of resources adult learners access may also invite study abroad participation for learners who may have typically dismissed it as an option.

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